

Did Jesus Really Say That?

Matt. 5:1-12

11/7/21

A number of years ago when I visited Israel, our tour group stopped at a small chapel overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It was called the Chapel of the Beatitudes, and was located in a place where Jesus may have preached his famous “Sermon on the Mount.” The chapel is an eight-sided building (representing the eight Beatitudes), and the high window on each side contains one of the Beatitudes. You might think it’s strange that a whole chapel is dedicated to these brief sayings of Jesus, but it’s really not. For the first three centuries of the church, these words formed the core of Christian teaching for new disciples. If you wanted to live as a follower of Jesus, this was the way! And the Beatitudes are still foundational for the Christian life today. Listen as I read them. *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.* ²*Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

³*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ⁴*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.* ⁵*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* ⁶*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.* ⁷*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.* ⁸*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.* ⁹*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.* ¹⁰*“Blessed are those who are*

persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹²*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matt. 5:1-12)

Last week we focused on the first four Beatitudes, which have to do with humility, those who grieve, meekness, and justice. This week we'll tackle the rest of them, beginning with *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."* (Matt. 5:7) Giving mercy to others reflects God's mercy to us in at least two ways. The first is empathy or compassion. God empathizes with us in our weaknesses, and came to earth in order to experience our lives as human beings! In the person of Jesus, God was hungry, thirsty, depressed, and joyful. He experienced the complexity of human relationships. And he even experienced death. God can empathize with our experiences and is compassionate toward us. As we show mercy to others, we are following God's example, as God is merciful to all people.

In addition, God's mercy is expressed in his forgiveness of our sins! In the Los Angeles riots which followed the first Rodney King verdict, Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten by an enraged gang. After years of painful recovery, he met face-to-face with his attackers, shook hands with them, and forgave them. A reporter,

commenting on the story wrote, “It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.” The only way that people in this world can make sense out of anyone who would show mercy to someone who had seriously harmed them- one of Jesus’ most basic commands- is to say that something must be seriously wrong with them!

But in addition to being a requirement for following Jesus, forgiveness is actually good for us! University of Michigan psychologist, Christopher Peters, who studies what makes people happy, said that forgiveness is the trait most linked to happiness. He stated, “It is the queen of all virtues and probably the hardest to come by.”

Unfortunately, it is more natural to us to hang on to a wrong done to us and nurse it until it becomes full-blown resentment and rage. That gives us a sense of self-righteousness and empowerment. But holding a grudge is toxic, and will eventually turn you into a bitter, unhappy person. Instead, we must choose to let go of wrongs done to us, trusting God to handle any pay-back and future justice. Forgiveness is a choice.

Clara Barton, the Civil War nurse who founded the Red Cross, was reminded by a friend of a vicious deed that someone had done to her years before. But Clara acted as if she had never heard of the incident. “Don’t you remember it?” her friend asked. “No,” replied Barton. “I distinctly

remember forgetting it years ago.” Forgiveness is a choice. “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*”

⁸“*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*” (Matt. 5:8)

“Pure in heart” here refers to those who are single-minded, who are committed to doing God’s will above all else, as spelled out in the rest of the Beatitudes and in Jesus’ other commands. It seems to me that attempting to live by these difficult instructions would require someone to be “pure in heart,” and that living in these ways (humbly, meekly, justly, and mercifully) would further purify their heart!

Let’s keep going. ⁹“*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*” (Matt. 5:9) There is a recognition here that conflict is part of the human condition. It was part of life in Jesus’ day with various Jewish sects (like the Pharisees and the Sadducees) intensely at odds with one another, coupled with strong anti-Roman feelings in cruel, occupied Palestine. In conflicted situations, people look for ways to gain an advantage over their enemies, and when they do, the other side finds a way to gain advantage over them, and the cycle continues. We see that today within our own country in matters of race and in partisan politics, and globally, with wars or intense conflicts between nations and between a whole host of ethnic groups. But in God’s Kingdom, those who work for peace are blessed. Peace-making is tough work, because those who work

for peace are often regarded as traitors by those on their own side of the conflict.

In his book, What's So Amazing About Grace, Phillip Yancey tells the following story: In 1987 an IRA bomb went off near Belfast, Ireland, amid a group of Protestants who had gathered to honor the war dead on Veteran's Day. Eleven people died and 63 others were wounded. What made this act of terrorism stand out from so many others was the reaction of a Methodist layman named Gordon Wilson. The bomb blast buried Wilson and his 20 year-old daughter, Marie, under five feet of concrete and brick. The last words Wilson heard from his daughter were, "Daddy, I love you very much." She suffered severe spinal and brain injuries and died several hours later in a hospital.

A newspaper proclaimed, "No one remembers what the politicians had to say at that time. (But) no one who heard Gordon Wilson will ever forget what he confessed... His grace towered over the miserable justifications of the bombers." Speaking from his hospital bed, Wilson said, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them."

But that wasn't the end. After his release from the hospital, Gordon Wilson took a great risk and led a crusade for Protestant-Catholic reconciliation. Protestant extremists who had planned to avenge the bombing, decided, because of the publicity surrounding Wilson, that vengeance would be politically foolish. Wilson wrote a book about his daughter, spoke out against violence, and constantly repeated the refrain, "Love is the bottom line." He met with the IRA, personally forgave them, and asked them to lay down their arms. He said, "I know you've lost loved ones, just like me. Surely, enough is enough. Enough blood has been spilled."

The Irish Republican Army ultimately made Wilson a member of its Senate. When he died in 1995, the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland, and all of Great Britain honored this ordinary Christian citizen who had gained fame for his Jesus-like grace and forgiveness. His spirit exposed by contrast the violent deeds of retaliation, and his life of peacemaking brought to the surface the craving for peace within many others. In time, partly because Wilson lived out the beatitudes, peace came to that troubled land.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul stated that while we were still sinners, enemies of God, Christ died for us, reconciling us to God. The work of reconciliation is God's work, and God calls us to do it, too. Fanning

the flames of division between us is not God's work, but Satan's. Are you a peacemaker- at home, at work, at school, in the community, and in our nation? Think about what you post on-line!

The last Beatitude is this, ¹⁰*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* ¹²*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* (Matt. 5:10-12) Since I preached a sermon on persecuted Christians a couple weeks ago, I won't say much about this one. But I would like to point out an insight found in verse 12, which helps us make sense of all the Beatitudes. *"Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven."*

Part of living according to the values of God's Kingdom is living today in the light of eternity. There are no guarantees that living according to God's values- humility, meekness, justice, mercy, single-mindedness, and peace-making- will pay off in the here-and-now. They often do pay off, but there is no guarantee that they will. So, living the Beatitudes requires faith that God will use our efforts to bring about his priorities for this world and reward us in the future. Do you have the faith and courage to live

according to the values expressed in the Beatitudes? I hope so, because following Jesus is not for cowards!

Perhaps we should pray now and every day, "Almighty God, grant me humility and meekness; lead me to seek justice and show mercy; help me to be single-minded in following you and to work for peace." Amen.